



Information Bulletin

Governor's Office of Emergency Services Law Enforcement Branch

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RESPONSE TO A SUICIDE/HOMICIDE BOMBER “PRE-DETONATION”

May 30, 2002

PREFACE

This is the second in our series of Information Bulletins dealing with the topic of response to suicide/homicide bombings. It should be noted that any occurrence of this type is an act of terrorism and will fall under FBI statutes and control. Immediate notification must be made and the federal response will be immediate and significant. This bulletin is designed to assist a first responder that may encounter a situation where the bomber may be identified or suspected but has not yet detonated the device.

BACKGROUND

The suicide bomber of the Middle East has risen to a very revered status among supporters of Palestinian liberation and other Islamic causes. Such bombers are driven by a number of causes, including religious fanaticism where a successful bombing can be seen as way to martyrdom and a desirable afterlife.

The Bush Administration has coined the term “Homicide Bomber” to describe what formerly was called a “suicide bomber” in the media. This is appropriate in that the bomber’s goal is to kill and injure as many people as possible through the detonation of the explosives concealed on their person. Also, past scenarios have used vehicles and boats to transport larger caches of explosives. This Information Bulletin will deal with individuals carrying explosives on their person.

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Middle East experience has shown:

- Men, women and older children have been homicide bombers.
- Targets have included buses, restaurants, public markets, police or military checkpoints, and other public places where people congregate and socialize. Generally, there is no regard for “innocent victims” such as children; however, there has been effort shown to particularly target government representatives such as police and the military.
- Devices used in the Middle East have been described as an explosive “belt,” usually a cloth vest-type garment with pockets to hold the explosives. A moderate amount of clothing can conceal the transport of a lethal amount of explosives without raising suspicion. However, do not automatically assume this would be the manner for the next attack.
- A few Middle East homicide bombers have been killed by police/military responders, some have been wrestled into submission by bus drivers, but most use the element of surprise where the detonation is the first indication of their presence.

It is important to remember, however, that if this scenario comes to the United States, it could take different forms. It is even possible that “copy-cats” could adapt this terrorist method for use with motives completely unlike those of the Middle Eastern bomber. These could tend to skew the current research results that delineate certain characteristics of fanatic behavior as a set of key indicators.

CONCEPTS

Prior to responding to a report of a homicide bomber, law enforcement personnel must realize some very important concepts that may be counter to previous training:

- “Close and negotiate” tactics should not be attempted. The desire of the suspect is not suicide; it is homicide. They will attempt to detonate their device if they believe they have been discovered. Switches have been on the chest area or held in the hands. Other Middle East terrorist devices have made use of cell phones for command detonation. Do not discount the fact that the bomb may have a “fail safe” cell phone initiator so an observer could detonate the explosives should the bomber be incapacitated. The standard police tactic of closing distance on a “suicidal” suspect to reason with them only increases the probability the officer(s) will become homicide victim(s). The homicide bomber is not despondent. They may be religiously motivated to the point of fanaticism so attempting rational negotiations may be futile.

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- If timely verification can be completed and a determination can be made that the suspect is indeed a homicide bomber, then this would appear to be a deadly force situation. Deadly force decisions must be based on local policies, procedures and guidelines, and must meet legal requirements. Note that there is considerable concern that a “center of mass shot” might set off an explosive charge if that is where the payload is being carried by the suspect. Local tactics and training should take this into account.
- After the bomber is incapacitated, either through direct police action or explosives detonation, no attempt should be made to approach and render aid to the suspect. Secondary devices should be expected such as a second suicide bomber, accomplices with an additional device, or pre-set vehicle bombs staged along main emergency routes to the scene. It should be noted that most explosive devices also contain fragmentation such as nails, nuts and bolts to maximize the deadly effects of the blast and kill or injure as many people as possible. Area evacuation should be completed, a crime scene cordon set up, and a bomb squad should be called to approach and evaluate the suspect and the scene for actual presence of explosives. At this point local authorities should ensure the scene is contained and allow federal authorities to respond and investigate.

RESPONSE CONSIDERATIONS

Call takers/dispatchers should get as much detailed information as possible. Every effort should be made to have a dispatcher keep the caller on an open line during the police response. Suspect description and specific location are important. Extreme specificity should be obtained as to the direct knowledge of the caller as to why the suspicious person is suspected of being a homicide bomber. Very little time will be available for police intervention if the suspect is indeed a homicide bomber.

All responders (police, fire, EMS) should not approach the suspect’s location displaying lights and sounding sirens. A quick but discreet “robbery in progress” type approach affords the best chance of not alerting the suspect, and allows the officer(s) to choose the approach maximizing an opportunity to intervene. Marked police vehicles should be parked carefully so the officers can make their final approach on foot without the suspect seeing the vehicles. A foot approach affords the officer(s) maximum options and the ability to maintain a safe distance between themselves and the suspect at all times.

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Responders should be divided into two groups: THREAT RESPONSE and EVACUATION.

- THREAT responders attempt to locate, confirm, isolate, contain, and engage.
- EVACUATION responders should begin to evacuate immediately the general vicinity of the suspect. Initiate evacuation after the suspect has been located so as not to create a bigger target for the suspect, or a crowd where the suspect can evade detection.

Responders should be prepared to establish flexible evacuation and containment areas as the suspect may not stand still. Communication among responders is vital, especially if the suspect is moving. Responders can expect to advance and retreat after initial suspect contact to maintain a safe separation distance from the suspect.

Standard admonitions against use of radios and cell phones are not applicable due to the overwhelming need for a rapid, coordinated response, and by responders maintaining safe separation distances between the bomber and themselves.

SEPARATION DISTANCE

Safe separation distances from the suspect must be maintained at all times. Safe distances are minimum estimations based on averages of the numerous variables possible, including amount and type of explosives, surrounding structures, glass walls, weather, etc. Do not hesitate to double or triple suggested minimum distances.

- The absolute minimum public evacuation distance is 900 feet (300 yards) from the suspect/explosives. This is a radius not a diameter. Do not hesitate to expand this distance considerably if the suspect is next to large structures, which can channel and amplify blast pressures, the presence of glass windows, which can cause secondary fragmentation problems, and/or suspect mobility. In Hazardous Materials terminology this is the HOT ZONE. Injuries and death can be expected within this radius.
- Initial command posts, fire, EMS, and mutual-aid staging should be OUTSIDE the minimum public evacuation area. Ensure this is far enough away to remain out of the view of the bomber so it does not become a target.
- Officers entering the public evacuation area should be wearing a minimum of standard body armor and eye protection (eye glasses or sunglasses w/ ANSI Z-87 rating).

OTHER DISTANCE ESTIMATIONS

- Minimum 350' radius expected for blast fragmentation
- Minimum 200' from detonation can result at least in moderate injuries
- Minimum 100' from detonation can result in at least serious injuries
- Minimum 50' from detonation can result in severe injuries or death

These are minimum distances and should be used only as guidelines, and should be adjusted to fit the circumstances that are presented. It must be remembered that serious blast injury or death are possible outside all of the above estimated minimum safe distances.

If lethal force is justified, shoot from a position of cover (any barrier such as car body, retaining wall, etc.). Cover provides some protection should a detonation result. Shooter concealment is preferred so the suspect does not anticipate the shot and detonate the explosives prior to being shot. It is important not to hit the explosives with a shot. Do not enter the minimum 50' safe distance to take any shot. Shoot from as far away as practical.

If the suspect is neutralized and there is no explosion, do not render aid. Retreat to a point of observation a minimum of 900' from the suspect, and call for the bomb squad. The suspect may be alive and could detonate the explosives upon your approach either deliberately or unconsciously. Many of the bombers are unaware they have been accompanied by an individual with the capability of remotely detonating the device. Keep this in mind before any approach is conducted. Be prepared to fire again if the suspect attempts to flee or is otherwise moving. Even if the suspect appears dead, do not approach as the explosives could have anti-disturbance devices, a timer, or other mechanisms meant to cause a detonation. A bomb squad should make the initial approach to a downed suspect using robotics or bomb suits even if their arrival may be prolonged.

SUMMARY

This information bulletin is designed to cover response issues before an explosion. Please refer to our prior bulletin for post-detonation response issues. Most of the material in this Bulletin was provided by Nick Concolino, an Advanced Explosives Instructor for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, and current member of the Yolo County Bomb Squad, at the request of OES. Others involved in EOD issues throughout country, including Rob Born of Sacramento FBI, also provided valuable information. Tom Murray and Michael Guerin edited the material. The OES Law Enforcement Branch can be contacted at (916) 845-8700.